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Hawking Democracy

YOU WONDER WHY we have a deficit? Greedy welfare mothers? Shiftless seniors? Not entirely.

Let me explain — and I'm not even going to mention the Pentagon, which once again this week demonstrated why it will never give up the

trophy for shameless profligacy. Our bold warriors paid \$2,043 for a "common hexagon-sided threaded nut," which is available at Hechinger's Home Improvement store for 13 cents.

No, I speak of a much more modest assault on our common sense and our pocket books, the National Endowment for Democracy, which last year got an appropriation of "only" \$31 million.

And what is NED? One of its enemies, Sen. Warren Rudman (R-N.H.) calls it "a slush fund for political hacks who like to travel to warm climates in cold weather."

And why, when we are \$200 billion in the red, do we have a taxpayer-supported Club Med? Who's to blame?

It turns out that it is just everybody who counts in Washington: the president, the Congress, the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the Chamber of Commerce and the labor unions.

The range of its sponsorship is, of course, the explanation for its survival. Reagan loyalists, to begin with, wish to nurture NED because it was his idea — floated in a London speech two years ago as an effort "to foster the infrastructure of democracy" in other countries.

This simply reflects a deeply held conservative conviction that the superior merit of democracy is a truth hidden from the rest of the world. Never mind the track record, which so copiously attests to the contrary — has anyone seen a German storming the Berlin Wall from the western side?

Mary McGrory SLUSHFUND

But just as the right is convinced that the Soviet Union is leagues ahead in armaments, it is sure that the Russians have the drop on us in the field of "winning hearts and minds."

Those not anxious to support the president have to fend off other supplicants in behalf of NED: the chairmen of both parties, lobbyists for the

Chamber and the AFL-CIO, and such influential board members as Dante Fascell of Florida, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, from whom every colleague is bound to seek a favor sooner or later.

Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), a leading right light, is chairman of NED's board. He says that "if the NED never gets off the ground, the biggest round of applause will come from the Kremlin."

One House member, Dan Mica (D-Fla.) in artless and chilling fashion, presented NED as a peaceful substitute to the CIA, whose current way of "fostering the infrastructure of democracy" is on view in Nicaragua, where U.S. surrogates and mercenaries are shooting peasants and burning their houses down in a "covert war."

Granted that it's better to send clipboards instead of guns, don't we have agencies like the State Department and the USIA to spread the word about our excellent way of life?

NED reflects the attitude held by many in both parties that the U.S. has a God-given right to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries.

And, to the mortification of NED's friends, it turned out that that was just what NED was doing. It is not easy to find out about its activities — NED is exempt from the Freedom of Information Act, and, despite a recently proclaimed policy of "openness," closes its meetings to the public.

But, thanks to a leaked cablegram from our ambassador to Panama,

Everett Briggs, we learn that the labor institute of the AFL-CIO, using \$20,000 from its NED kitty, intervened in the recent, close election in Panama. The military-supported candidate, with U.S. labor sponsorship, won by 1,700 votes.

Ambassador Briggs, who doubtless spends much of his time assuring the Panamanians that the United States would never meddle in its electoral process, cabled an urgent appeal to Washington to suspend such operations "before the U.S. government is further compromised in Panama."

The House was sufficiently stirred to vote to kill NED on May 31.

But it was revived by the Senate, which was sufficiently embarrassed to authorize the cut of \$10 million granted to the Republican and Democratic parties, but not enough to put the Endowment out of its miserable mischief.

Sen. Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.), who doesn't think NED has the right to exist, nonetheless voted to save it, because of "the president's commitment."

Rep. Hank Brown (R-Colo.), who with Rep. Richard Ottinger (D-N.Y.) led the successful House fight, wants to turn all its money over to Fulbright scholarships.

"People around the world don't need to be sold on the virtues of our democracy," he says. "They can't wait to find out how you do it."

But NED proves that once you have funded a foolish notion and given enough gravy to enough people, it will live forever, and hang the deficit.

Mary McGrory is a columnist for The Post.